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## Testimony of Jean Mills Aranha, Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. In Support of SB 280 An Act Concerning the Department of Social Services

January 28, 2015

This testimony is submitted by Jean Mills Aranha, an attorney working for Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). I support this bill on behalf of the legal services programs in Connecticut and the low income individuals we serve. My work tells me on a daily basis that we need a comprehensive analysis of and solution to the problems plaguing the Department of Social Services (DSS).

I work in the Public Benefits and Elder Law Units of CLS. My clients are all low income, and many of them are also elderly and/or disabled. Most of them are entitled to benefits administered by the DSS. I continually see people who are wrongly denied or terminated from public benefits to which they are entitled. These denials and terminations happen not because these elderly, poor and disabled individuals have failed properly and timely to apply and provide the required information to DSS, but because DSS regularly fails them by losing their documents, sending out confusing, incorrect and illegal notices, and making it impossible for them to access workers at DSS to get these problems corrected.

My clients are routinely sent notices by DSS stating that the benefits they need for basic sustenance – food assistance, medical assistance and cash – are being denied or terminated. The notices say that the clients have failed to send in information required by the DSS to process or maintain their benefits. The notices say that if the person disagrees with the notice the person should call the DSS Benefit Center.



The Benefits Center is an abysmal failure. Callers wait hours on hold without being able to speak to a worker. I have heard this complaint from social service providers in the community as well as clients. I encourage any legislator who doubts this to dial 1-855-6-ConneCT and make a personal test. DSS admits on its public website that the Call Center's average wait time is over an hour and that it answers only about a third of the calls made to it. Low income individuals in low wage jobs generally have limited cell phone minutes and limited time during DSS working hours to make extended calls to try to reach a worker.

As an alternative to the Call Center, individuals can try to reach a worker at the Regional Offices. Long lines form there at the beginning of each month, regardless of the weather, as people try to get their benefits issued resolved. I have seen these lines personally in Bridgeport, and my colleagues have seen them in other Regional Offices around the state. Sometimes people in these long lines are turned away and told to come back another day.

Furthermore, these people should not need to make contact with DSS at all – because they have already provided all the information required. I know this because in some cases I have helped them send it in, and I have maintained proof of mailing in their files. When I present this proof to DSS, the case is generally quickly corrected, and benefits are granted or reinstated. That is fine for my clients, although they still experience the fear of receiving the notice, and they still have to take out time and find transportation to bring the notices to my office. But I worry more about the more disabled or less knowledgeable people who are also receiving these incorrect notices and are not able to bring them to my attention. How are their cases being resolved?

There are other problems with the administration of DSS programs. Applications for Medicaid are sometimes approved through Access Health CT computers, but not correctly input into DSS computers, so that providers cannot verify eligibility. Disabled or elderly persons are told by Access Health CT that they are ineligible for Medicaid when in fact they are eligible for Husky C, which must be applied for through DSS. Disabled individuals are not always accorded the accommodations they need and to which they are entitled. The list is long -- I am sure you will hear from many people who will share with you the problems they have had with DSS.

We have been told for years that the modernization of DSS' outdated computer eligibility system, EMS, was going to solve all these problems. That modernization

is still years away, and elderly, disabled and low income people are having problems with access to DSS now.

In addition to studying the entire administration of DSS, an immediate solution is obvious. DSS needs more staff -- more staff to handle calls at the Benefits Center, and more staff to help people with their eligibility issues at the Regional Offices.

I support SB 280 and I encourage this Committee to consider every option at its disposal to assist these vulnerable citizens in accessing the benefits to which they are entitled through DSS.